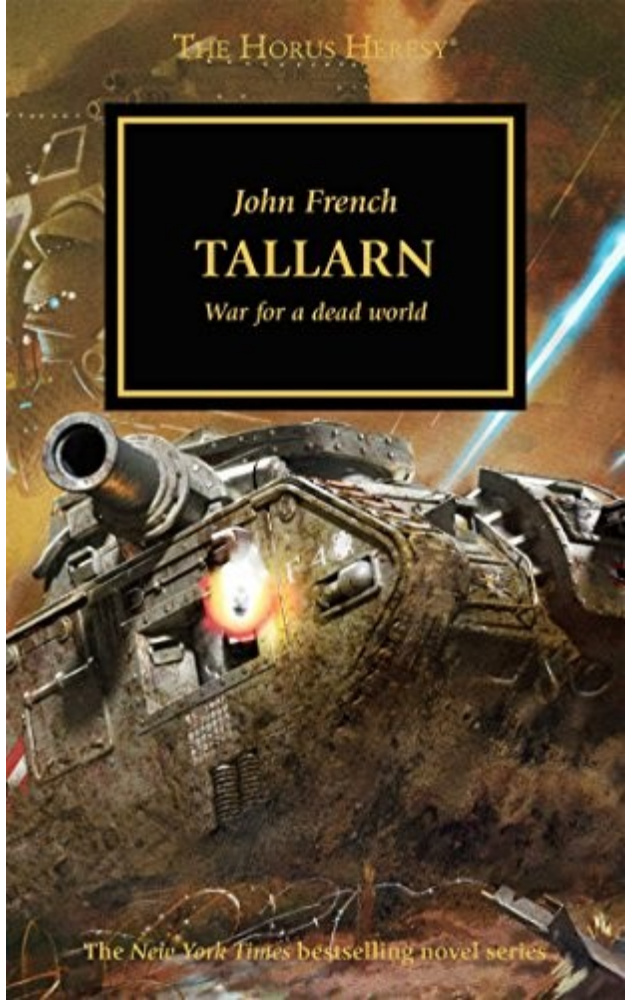
THE HORUS HERESY
John French
TALLARN
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TALLARN: SIREN

John French

The loyalists' only hope lies in the song of the last surviving astropath

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Tallarn: Siren

John French

'For the dream of a voice I have crossed the night, and walked the road to the horizon.'

– *Songs of The Lost* (Canto XII) by Alderra Sul-cado, Unification-era Terra

The Battle of Tallarn was a battle that might never have been. In the wake of the Iron Warriors bombardment, Tallarn was a hell made real. Viral agents had reduced all biological matter to slime. Death blew in the wind and rolled in the water. Nothing lived or could live on the surface. Some – the fortunate or the cursed – did survive. Sealed beneath the ground in shelters, the last humans on Tallarn breathed air that had never touched the land above, woke to yellow machine light, and heard silence crowd around them like the promise of oblivion.

On the surface, the Iron Warriors descended into the hell they had made. War machines crisscrossed the desolation, sensors reaching into the wind and finding no answer. Beneath the earth, the survivors readied to venture out of their shelters. Skinned in envirosuits and sealed inside tanks, they went to the surface and discovered the destroyers of their world had remained. A war of revenge began. Squadrons of tanks raided the surface, killed Iron Warriors and sank back beneath the ground. Fresh corpses dissolved into the blighted soil, and the husks of vehicles became home to the wind. Yet still this was not a true battle.

Perturabo had sent only a fraction of his Legion's strength to the surface. The defiant raiders took their toll but the Iron Warriors always had more to take the place of the dead. Without aid the survivors would dwindle, and their struggle would pass into the unknown void between history and memory. To make it the battle whose name would echo down the millennia would take more. It would take armies greater than those that had survived the first attack. It would take those loyal to the Emperor knowing that there was a war here to fight. It would take an event around which history could pivot.

'Can anyone hear me?' Gatt released the transmit key and waited. Static washed out of the speaker grille. Kulok watched as the young man closed his eyes for a second and took a tired breath. 'Please acknowledge if you can hear.'

The static returned. Gatt looked up at Kulok. Red veins crazed the whites of the boy's eyes. It seemed as if he were about to say something, but he turned and rested his forehead on the knuckles of his hands.

Pieces of machinery covered the pressed metal table in front of Gatt. Brass-cased devices clicked with the sound of turning cogs. Tangles of wires linked the equipment to a generator unit on the floor. Kulok could smell the metallic tang of electrics shorting out, and the purr of the generator unit set his teeth on edge. The promethium lamp hanging from the low roof spluttered and the light dimmed. Kulok glanced at it, holding the small tongue of light in his gaze for a second until it settled. The lighting system in the shelter had died two days ago. The orange glow of promethium lamps was the only light they had now. Thankfully, the air reprocessors were still working.

Kulok took a breath and rubbed his eyes. The air stank even after weeks of breathing it. What he would give for a cup of water that did not taste of chemicals. A brief memory of the snow water sellers filled his mind: their bandoliers of glasses glinting in the sunlight, the frosted canisters balanced on their shoulders as they walked the Crescent City's streets.

He looked up at the sound of the hatch opening. Sabir stepped into the room, glanced at Kulok, and closed the hatch behind him. He looked more like a vagrant than a prefectus in Tallarn's administration. An expanding patina of stains covered the older man's robes. Folds of skin sagged from his chin. His grey eyes held sticky moisture at the corners and grease sheened his grey hair. To be fair, no one else in the small shelter looked any better. Kulok was sure, though, that the sour twist to Sabir's lips had been there long before they had ended up buried down here.

'How's the seer?' asked Kulok.

'Dreaming.' Sabir shrugged. 'Dying.'

Kulok nodded. He had expected no different. The astropath had been delirious since the bombardment. Sabir had said that the seer rarely used his gifts any more, and had kept to his chambers in the city's censorium. It had only been the screaming that had reminded the scribes that the astropath was there when the bombardment had started. Now the old seer just slept soundlessly in a coma. He would not last much longer, Kulok was certain of that. Already wisp thin and creased with age, the astropath's pulse was weakening with every passing day. It was just another reason to find out whether they were the only people still alive on Tallarn.

Kulok glanced back at Gatt. The boy was staring at the vox dials, mouth still, finger unmoving on the transmission key.

'Keep trying,' said Kulok.

Gatt did not respond.

'Do another sweep through the major channels then start back on the minor ones.' He turned to the doorway and placed his hand on the locking wheel.

'No one can hear us,' said Gatt.

Kulok could hear the exhaustion in the words, and the tremble of anger hidden just beneath its surface.

‘We have to keep trying,’ said Kulok, as he pulled the hatch open.

‘Give the kid a break,’ said Sabir.

‘We have to–’ began Kulok, but Sabir cut him off.

‘We?’ Sabir’s lip twisted back from his yellow teeth. ‘When did you start to talk for everyone?’ He shook his head. ‘You’re not even supposed to be here, and now you are saying what we must do?’

Kulok took a step towards the prefectus. Sabir flinched back, eyes widening. Kulok stopped.

You’re not supposed to be here.

It was true, of course. Kulok was in the shelter by luck rather than design. The shelter was one of the smaller ones, buried under one of the Sapphire City’s grand censoriums. He had been waiting in the second vestibule on the ground floor when the bombs fell. According to the city records, he owed tax and fines dating back over a decade. He had been avoiding the summons for the last year, but at last a magistrate had tired of Kulok’s protests. Bondsmen had come for him and made it clear that it did not matter that Kulok had seen service in the Crusade; he was coming with them whether he liked it or not. He owed those bondsmen his life.

When the roof in the censorium had begun to shake, he had known what it was. He had been on the surface of Desh when the fleet had opened up on the fortress cities, and the memory of that moment pulled him from his seat as the sirens began to sound. He had not known that the bombardment was viral, but a fleet could reduce an unshielded city to rubble with less exotic weapons. He had found the entrance to the shelter, and was just through the door as the biohazard alarms added to the din. The hatch had locked behind him, and he had found himself starring into the eyes of the few others who had found safety. Most were scribes and officials, junior for the most part and all terrified. A few, like Sabir, had the trappings of authority, but not a trace of the will to use it. None of them had known what to do. All of them wanted someone to tell them what to do almost as much as they wanted it all to not be happening. Kulok had filled that need, though that did not stop some, like Sabir, resenting his assumed command.

Kulok sighed and turned away from the prefectus.

‘I am just trying to get through this,’ said Kulok. ‘The astropath will die without help, and we won’t be far behind. We are a handful of people buried under a city. No one will come looking for us. Two weeks and we will be living in the dark listening to the last air hiss from the vents. That is, if the water systems keep working.’ He turned back to Sabir. ‘Do you like that idea? Does that calm your concerns about authority, Prefectus Sabir?’

Sabir just stared back.

Kulok shook his head. ‘Keep trying, please,’ he said to Gatt, and stepped towards the hatch.

‘It won’t work,’ said Gatt.

Kulok turned back to look at the young man.

‘I said it before I started. This set is for surface use,’ said Gatt. ‘It just does not have the power to punch through the ground above.’

Kulok said nothing for a moment. ‘And if it was on the surface?’

‘I don’t know.’ Gatt exhaled and ran his hands through his hair. ‘Maybe. But it would depend how close the receiver was. If there was someone else close by or with a big receiver they might hear… But there might be no one to hear.’

Kulok heard Sabir start to say something.

‘What about reaching the Sapphire City, or Zeffar?’ asked Kulok. ‘There were big shelters under those, military grade.’

Gatt shook his head. ‘It’s six hundred kilometres to the Sapphire City, a thousand to Zeffar. The signal won’t make that.’

Kulok nodded slowly, an idea hardening in his mind. ‘Get the vox into the armoured carrier vehicle.’

Gatt frowned, then his eyes went wide.

'You can't go out,' said Sabir.

Kulok turned to look at the older man. There was fear in the prefectus' watery eyes. They had all seen the atmospheric warning lights shining red above the outer hatches.

'We must do this,' said Kulok.

'You will kill us!'

'The vehicle ramp is airlocked,' said Kulok calmly. 'We have transport. No guns, but it's enviro-sealed. There is a decontamination gate in the airlock. We probably have enough power to make all of those work.'

'You can't.' A tremble of pleading edged Sabir's voice, and the skin under his stubble was pale.

'Two weeks, Sabir,' said Kulok. 'After that, we might as well open the doors and let whatever's outside in. You can stay here with the rest. Look after the seer.'

A red flush spread across Sabir's cheeks as fear shifted back to anger. 'Who says you are–'

'I say, Sabir,' said Kulok and watched the words sink in. 'I say.'

Lycus slept, and remembered.

'There is nothing to discuss,' he had said, and held his gaze steady. Above him the man on the throne of lapis shifted, and did not meet Lycus' eye.

The room had felt crowded even though it was large enough to hold several hundred. Golden fabric hung from the copper-lined ceiling, cutting the space into channels that led the eye to the windows which opened onto the views of the Crescent City beyond. Blue and green tiles covered the floor. The old man who sat on a green alabaster throne at the chamber's centre was still, rigid with formality.

Dellasarius, victor of the Tempest Conflagration, now governor militant of Tallarn, wore red armour shaped like the toned muscles of ancient heroes. Silver thunderbolts cut across the lacquered metal. Struts and pistons ran down his limbs, and every now and then a bellows hiss of air escaped from a vent in the side of his torso. Set behind a wide gorget, the governor's face was blade thin. The only other flesh that was visible was Dellasarius' right hand where his rings of office glittered from spider thin fingers. But it was his eyes that said more than anything else: grey and watery, they fixed on nothing, as if only wanting to see the world in glances. Dellasarius was a hero, Lycus knew that, but the governor looked as though mundanity had leeched away his past strength.

A clutch of advisors – Lycus presumed that is what they were – stood around the throne. They all looked wealthy, soaked in fine fabrics, jewellery glinting on their fingers and necks. A few exchanged glances. Those that had looked at Lycus had done so for only an instant. He stood five paces from the base of the throne, his helmet under his right arm, his left hand resting on the pommel of the blade sheathed at his waist. Jagged ridges and gouges of battle damage ran under the yellow paint of Lycus' armour. Glossy pleats of flesh twisted across his cheeks and his mouth was a twisted gash over broken teeth. Lycus could smell the mingled fear in the humans' sweat. He did not like this, he never liked this. But it was a necessity. He had a rising concern that he was going to have to be everything they feared him to be.

One of the crowd of advisors took a step forward, dared a glance at Lycus' face, and then dropped his eyes. The man had a pinched pale face the colour of milk. His lips twisted before he spoke.

'With all humbleness, my lord–'

'I am not a lord.' Lycus' voice cut the man's words like a sword blow. Silence filled the heartbeat after he spoke. Lycus nodded to the governor militant. 'He is a lord.'

The fabric of the advisor's robes was trembling. Lycus noticed that the cloth was embroidered leaf patterns in iridescent turquoise on black. He presumed that the man was deciding how afraid he was of a Space Marine. The advisor licked his lips and opened his mouth.

Not scared enough, *thought Lycus.*

'With all humbleness,' said the advisor again. The words were so honeyed they almost dripped from the man's tongue. 'There are a number of things that must be resolved before your request can be considered.'

Lycus remained silent. The advisor who had spoken licked his lips again.

'My lord Dellasarius,' said Lycus, turning his gaze slowly back to the governor militant. 'Who are these people?'

The governor militant looked around at the crowd of advisors, and then back to Lycus.

'Representatives of the caliphers and trade dynasties of Tallarn,' said Dellasarius. Lycus saw a flash of emotion ripple across the wrinkled skin. 'They are concerned with the practical complexities of what you are saying.'

'Loyalty is not complex,' said Lycus.

The governor's eyes met Lycus's gaze. He gave a small nod.

'But its workings are,' said a heap of a man smothered in saffron silk.

Lycus looked at the man, and was surprised to see that there was no fear in the amber flecked eyes. The saffron-clad advisor gestured with a fat hand heavy with silver and gold.

'What will it mean for this world? You say that we must mobilise and look to our defences. That we must expend resources fortifying our planet and our system.'

The advisor opened both his hands as he made the final point, as if expressing honest sorrow. The other advisor, with the sour-milk face, filled the pause before Lycus could reply.

'And you say that we must stand ready to send forces wherever you think they are needed.'

Lycus nodded, allowing his left hand to shift to the pommel of his sword. 'That is what you must do.'

'We do not have those resources,' said the pale-faced man with a grimace. Behind him there was a ripple of fabric and a trembling of jewels as the advisors nodded and muttered agreement.

'Our coffers have run dry for years,' said the fat man with a shrug. 'Things are not what they were.'

'Immaterial,' said Lycus. His face had hardened. 'Are you wilfully blind to what the galaxy has become? This was a primary-grade staging planet – a crusade hub. There are troops here, and weapons, and materiel.'

The governor gave a small nod, but the fat man gave a brief laugh that sent his cheeks and chins shaking.

Lycus felt a caustic tingle in his muscles, and took a careful breath to keep his anger chained.

'Scraps. Mismatched units stranded here, equipment that has no operators, weapons that have no bullets, bullets that have no weapons.'

'Sadurni…' began Dellasarius. A little colour flushed into the governor's withered face.

Lycus turned, his entire presence now focused on the advisors. The crowd seemed to shrink, a low trembling running through the throng.

'Are you saying that you cannot or that you will not serve your Emperor?' Lycus' voice was low, hard edged. As he spoke he readied himself, preparing his muscles to draw and fire his bolt pistol.

Am I too late? *The question rolled through him as the conditioned kill reflexes slotted into place*. Is there something other than greed here? Have the agents of the traitors already been here? Are these people more than blind? Will this be like Cantaridine again?

'No!' roared Dellasarius. The governor was on his feet. 'This world is loyal to Terra, and we shall–'

The alarm screamed. The advisors froze. The noise intensified as siren after siren rose in chorus.

The governor was standing where he had risen from his throne, his mouth opening. Lycus was two strides across the room before the second siren started. The advisors had not moved. They were standing, hands pressed against their ears.

In Lycus' mind, facts and instinct formed conclusions as his muscles pushed him forwards. The alarm was for an orbital bombardment. Munitions fired from orbit took time to cross a planet's shell of air. But not much time. They would have minutes, if they were lucky.

He seized the governor. The man's puzzled expression twisted to shock as Lycus lifted him from the ground and turned towards the room's doors. The advisors were moving now, running like silk-draped cattle. Lycus surged through them without breaking stride. The room's doors were copper-plated plasteel, carved with base reliefs of vines curling through trees. Lycus felt the impact jolt through his body as his shoulder crumpled the doors and ripped them from their frames.

'What is happening?' gasped Dellasarius. Lycus was dragging him with him as he ran.

'The enemy is here, lord,' he said. Out beyond the high windows of the palace, the sky brightened with the light of fresh, false suns.

'Marshal Lycus?' the voice said nearby.

He blinked, and the half of his mind that had fallen through the waking dream of the past meshed with the half that had remained awake. The room around him was small and bare. A lumen-globe shone with a dirty light above the only door. In the weeks since the bombardment, this had been his sanctuary in the few moments he took for rest. He was alone here, a last warrior of the VII Legion on Tallarn. No word had come from the *Light of Inwit* after the attack. That the strike cruiser might have survived was a possibility. That it might have reached the system edge, and even now be bringing word of the death of Tallarn to forces loyal to the Emperor, was also a possibility. Both seemed unlikely to Lycus. His brothers were dead, his ship lost, and he was alone amongst the remains of humanity on a dead world.

'Marshal?' came the voice again, and the chamber door hinged inwards. The human who stepped through was shivering despite the warm air. The man's face was pale under a shaved scalp, his uniform ill-fitting and stained with dry sweat.

'Yes,' said Lycus.

The aide stopped where he was and began twitching his weight from foot to foot. The man was coming down off a stim high. Lycus had noticed that a lot of the officers in the Rachab fortress had taken to using narcotics to counter the effects of fatigue.

'The governor militant requests your presence,' said the aide, carefully.

Lycus watched the aide try to remain still, and then stood. His armour hummed to full life as he moved. His bolter came up with him and clamped to his thigh with a snap of magnetic force. He moved towards the door. The aide followed.

'Where is the governor militant?' asked Lycus as he ducked through the door.

'In the main communication hub,' said the aide, running to keep up. Lycus looked around at the man as he strode on.

'The signal arrays have heard something,' said the man. 'Something new.'

'Again,' said Kulok, raising his voice over the growl of the vehicle's power plant.

Gatt shook his head and gestured at a gauge beside the drive column.

'The power reserves are almost empty. We are draining the fuel.'

The suit muffled Gatt's words. Even through the internal vox, he had to raise his voice to be heard over the rumble of the carrier's engine. The machine was a big beast with high sides and a blunt nose painted in white and blue. The rest of its slab metal hide had been a pale grey, stamped with the emblems of the Crescent City's administration. It had been intended as an emergency transport for officials in the case of a mass riot. Its colours had reflected that purpose: a bold statement of authority in the face of anarchy. The heraldry had not lasted long after they reached the surface. After a few minutes of rolling through the fog drowned streets, Kulok had noticed grey sludge running down the glass of the vision slits. The air was dissolving the paint as it passed over them. He had not mentioned it to Gatt; the boy was rattled enough already.

Kulok looked at the fuel gauge. They had drained the power reserves, and now were running everything off the engines. Most of the main tank was gone, and they would have to use the reserve to get them back to the shelter.

'There is enough,' he said. 'Keep transmitting.'

'What if we get lost?' asked Gatt. 'What if it takes us more fuel to get back than it took to get here?'

Kulok looked at him for a long moment. He had stopped the carrier on top of a hill. Where exactly in the city they were, he was not sure – possibly in the foot hills close to the Dawn Tower. They had moved through streets heaped with slime, sliding and skidding every few meters. The buildings had loomed through the fog, glass clinging to the empty eyes of windows. He had thought he had recognised a water fountain, its tiered pools brimming with black water. Twenty years he had walked the streets of the Crescent City, from the sprawl on the slopes of the mountains to the river forks. He knew its smells, and the feel of its stones beneath tyre and foot. But the Crescent City no longer existed. The buildings and streets no longer formed a city; they had become something else, a tangle of monoliths set to watch over the dead. The route back to the shelter only existed as set of memorised landmarks and distances in Kulok's mind. If they ran low on fuel, or if he forgot the route, then they would die on the surface.

'Send one more transmission,' he said. 'Then we move out.'

Gatt looked at him, suddenly uncertain as Kulok sat back in the drive cradle.

'One more?' asked Gatt. 'If no one has heard us yet–'

'Just send it,' said Kulok. If the boy was looking to protest again, Kulok did not see. He had closed his eyes, feeling the big frame of the carrier shake around him as the engines turned over.

'This is the Crescent City censorium shelter. Please respond. We require assistance and evacuation. Survivors include senior administrators,' Gatt paused. Static buzzed over the open vox. 'Look, we have an old man dying, and the rest of us aren't far behind. He is an astropath, not that that will make any difference, because you can't hear this. There is no point to the message. You aren't there! No one is there!' He stopped. His finger still held on the transmission key for a second, then he released it. The static died. He turned to look at Kulok and shrugged as though to pre-empt whatever rebuke was coming.

Kulok met the boy's eyes. They were hard with defiance behind the fogged eyepieces.

'Alright,' said Kulok softly. 'Alright…' He reached out and punched a control. The engine noise cycled down to silence. 'We wait an hour,' said Kulok, 'then move.'

'Why wai–'

'I need to sleep,' said Kulok, voice hard. Then he shook his head and turned away to pull himself out of the driver's cradle. 'I need to sleep.'

He lay down in the crew compartment. The light coming from the armoured view slits was grainy yellow. He rested his head against his hands and closed his eyes. Sleep drifted up into his thoughts, filling his head with memories of clear skies and swift water.

'Can you hear that?' asked Gatt.

Kulok sat up, his half formed dreams fading slowly. He glanced at the vox transmitter, but it sat silent. Gatt was sitting up, head tilted to the side. Kulok blinked, opened his mouth… and heard it.

A thin, high wail slid into his ears. On and on it rolled ululating up and down, each note sliding to the next in drawn-out rhythm. For a second he thought it was coming from inside the carrier, but it was coming from every direction, seeping in through the hull and his suit. After a long moment he gave a cold bark of laughter. Gatt twitched his head towards him.

'It's the city's attack alarms,' said Kulok. 'The power to them must still be running. They are still sounding the warning.'

Gatt shivered, but said nothing. Kulok settled onto the floor of the crew compartment and closed his eyes again. Around him, the sound of sirens stretched out into the dark behind his eyes, and dreams of the dead

city came to claim him.

The adepts and officers turned to look at Lycus as he entered the command chamber. He ignored them, crossing the space with fluid strides. A pillar of machinery thrust from the centre of the floor, hung with cabling and tended by two enginseers. The room smelt of human sweat and ozone.

This was the true heart of the Rachab fortress, and the centre for the war of vengeance against the Iron Warriors. Buried under the mountains to the north of the Crescent City, the Rachab was vast. Its vaults extended down to the root of the mountain range and spread through the rock in a warren of caverns and tunnels. It had been used as the seat of the Great Crusade in this volume of space, but dust and silence had gathered in its halls before the Iron Warriors had come. Now atrocity had given it new purpose.

A few of the officers exchanged glances, a few others just stared at him. Dellasarius stood beside the stack of machinery at the centre of the chamber, his aides and senior officers clustered armour him. He turned to look at Lycus and gave a small nod. Some of the officers around the governor militant hesitated in the middle of saluting. Dellasarius' greeting – both curt and familiar – confused them. Most of them were unseasoned, and strung out by the demands of the last few weeks. These were the commanders of soldiers left behind by war and history, flotsam generals now called to lead in a war that seemed already lost. Most were already confused by the presence of a transhuman in their midst. Lycus' nebulous level of authority within the leadership of the loyalists was not helping.

Lycus pointed at where a green transmission light pulsed on the bronze communication dais. 'When did the transmission come in?' he asked.

'We picked it up forty minutes ago,' said a red-robed adept in a dead machine voice. 'It could have been transmitting longer. The transmission is poor quality. The probability is that they are using limited range equipment beyond its ordained rating. Transmission ceased ten minutes ago. We have a vox capture of the full duration of the transmission.'

'Put it on speaker,' said Lycus. An officer in the crimson uniform of the Tallarn Governance Command glanced at Dellasarius from her place beside the communications dais.

'Put it on,' said the governor militant. The voice filled the chamber a second later.

'This is the Crescent… censorium… respond… Assistance…' Static wailed and chopped through the voice. Lycus could hear the tiredness in the words – a young male human, twenty years perhaps, wrung out and talking by rote rather than from hope.

'He just repeats the same message,' said the officer. She was called Sussabarka, Lycus recalled.

'You have composited a meaning?' asked Lycus.

'They claim to be transmitting on behalf of the Crescent City censorium shelter,' said Sussabarka. 'They are asking for assistance and evacuation of a dozen administrative personnel, *senior* personnel to be precise.'

'What was the size of the censorium shelter?' asked Lycus.

'Small,' said another officer, eyes darting to Lycus and away. 'It was a bolt hole built in case of civil unrest. It could house fifty at the most, but it's not equipped for prolonged use under these… conditions.'

'Does it have any strategic reserves or capabilities?'

Sussabarka shook her head. 'None.'

'It is a burrow built to make the great and the good feel safe,' said a cold voice.

Every one of the officers turned to look at Dellasarius. The governor turned to Lycus, one grey eyebrow arched above his eyes. 'It was pointless and is worthless.'

'Then why summon me?' asked Lycus.

The recorded voice of the transmission cracked and spat through the silence.

'…City censorium… please…'

‘Because of the last thing included in the transmission before it went off air,’ said Dellasarius.

‘Survivors include…’

Lycus held Dellasarius’ gaze, and for the first time noticed the glimmer of fire in the pale eyes.

‘…include…’

The governor gave a small nod, and the ghost of a smile brushed across his wasted face.

‘…an astropath…’ said the voice from the static.

Kulok started the carrier’s engine, and the sound of the sirens vanished. Vibration kicked through the machine’s body. He had slept for… He did not know how long he had slept for, and in most ways that mattered, it did not matter at all. Night was beginning to creep across the city. Beyond the view slits, the fog shimmered through decaying colours. That was not good. He ran through the landmarks that would lead them back to the shelter. He hoped that he could still find them in the failing light. Gatt sat beside him, hunched and silent. Lycus paused, the engine rumbling through his bones.

‘Gatt,’ he said. The boy did not move. ‘Try the vox again.’

‘Why?’ asked Gatt.

Because we are going back to die in a stinking hole in the ground, thought Kulok. *Because someone else must be out there.* They must. He spoke none of his thoughts.

‘One last check,’ he said.

Gatt was still for a long moment then gave a gesture that was half a nod and half a shrug, and pulled himself back over to the vox transmitter.

‘Alright,’ said Gatt.

‘Did you respond?’ asked Lycus.

The officer called Sussabarka shook her head.

‘Not at first,’ she said. ‘The signal was poor quality and in clear. There seemed no point in responding to–’

‘People who were going to be dead soon,’ said Lycus, his voice emotionless.

‘Indeed,’ said Sussabarka.

‘But after that final transmission?’

‘We attempted to establish signal conjunction,’ answered one of the tech priests. ‘But could not locate the transmission. The highest probability is that they ceased transmission.’

‘And that could mean… several things,’ said Dellasarius carefully.

The lights blinked on the communication dais. The recorded voice had unwound into a dull hiss of static. No one said anything. No one needed to say anything. An astropath could mean that a message could be sent to other loyalist forces. Tallarn’s plight, and the presence of the full might of the Iron Warriors, could be a secret no more. It was a slim hope, a strand hanging by a single word spoken by a voice that might now belong to a dead man.

‘This is the Crescent City censorium shelter,’ said Gatt, then paused, breathed slowly and continued. ‘Can anyone hear this?’

A gust of crackle came over the vox as Gatt released the transmission key.

Kulok waited.

Nothing. Just the hiss of machine silence. After a long moment, he nodded to Gatt.

‘We are moving,’ he said, and engaged the engine. Gears meshed, and the machine lurched. A dark numbness was spreading through him, pulling his thoughts down into a toneless void.

The vox crackled, and Gatt reached for the power switch.

'…Crescent… shelter…'

The voice reached through the static. Gatt's hand froze. Kulok twisted in the drive cradle.

'…hear… respond…'

Gatt did not move, transfixed by the sound coming from the speakers.

'…confirm…'

'This is the Crescent City shelter,' said Gatt at last, and there were tears in the boy's words.

'We hear you, Crescent shelter,' said the comms officer. 'Your location is confirmed. Prepare for relief force. Short-range communication will be on frequencies daleth-sigma-two-one, redundancy chi-four-seven. Use encryption key listed on magenta code key for all future comms. Confirm and list back, Crescent shelter.'

Lycus listened as the shaking human voice listed back the details. Static bubbled up every few words, and it took several passes to be certain that both sides of the transmission had understood.

'Wait for us, Crescent shelter,' said the comms officer at last. 'We are coming. Out.'

Lycus waited for the signal noise to fade, and then turned to Dellasarius. 'You had already decided on a course of action?'

The governor militant nodded. The rest of the human officers were watching silently, some busying themselves with minor tasks, others standing with stiff formality as the military ruler of Tallarn and the Marshal of the VII Legion spoke.

'If they do have an astropath, this one action could change the course of this battle.'

Lycus gave a single nod. 'I will lead the ground operation.'

'Thank you, Marshal Lycus,' said Dellasarius. 'If you succeed, Tallarn will owe you a great debt twice over.'

Lycus shook his head. 'Service, loyalty, honour, these are both the debt and the payment.'

Dellasarius bowed his head briefly.

Lycus turned, his thoughts shifting between calculations and threat assessments.

The Crescent City censorium was fifty kilometres from the Rachab's southern foothill entrance. In clear conditions, with Legion war machines, that distance could be crossed in under an hour. But he did not have the strength of his battle-brothers with him.

'Four vehicles, your fastest based on balance of ordnance, armour weight and reliability. Two main battle tanks, an assault carrier, and a machine with sky cover capability. A squad in environmental armour, void hardened if available. Your best crews and soldiers, experience and fortitude weighted over rank. All ready to move out within ten minutes.'

Dellasarius flicked his eyes at the officer called Sussabarka.

'Make it so, brigadier.'

She saluted, but paused, frowning.

'Is there a problem?' asked Dellasarius.

'You have no capacity for evacuation of those in the shelter.'

Lycus looked at her and nodded. 'That is because we are not going to evacuate them,' he said.

Sussabarka looked at him, and he saw realisation harden in her eyes.

'The signal we heard, and those that we exchanged with the Crescent shelter, they were in clear…' she said.

'We are not alone,' said Dellasarius, 'and if we heard them, there is a chance, a very good chance, that our enemies did too.'

'And if they did, they will be coming,' said Lycus. 'They will be coming to silence this one chance we have to send word to those loyal to the Emperor. Speed and strength, those are the only things that matter

now. Our objective, and our only objective, is to reach this astropath. No matter the cost.'

'They are coming,' said Gatt, as soon as the inner door on the decontamination lock opened. Sabir and a cluster of the other survivors were waiting for them. Gatt bounded towards them grinning, eyes dancing with exhaustion and adrenaline. 'They are coming for us, a full relief force.' Sabir frowned and looked past Gatt at Kulok.

'It's true,' said Kulok as he sealed the hatch. He felt strangely empty. He had not expected to feel like this, but then had he expected to really make contact with anyone? Was it just a drive to survive, so deeply rooted in the meat of his species, that had pushed him on out beyond the edge of hope? Now, with the promise of rescue a reality, he did not know how to feel, and every thought rang hollow in his head.

Gatt was babbling to Sabir and the others, voice loud and echoing off the rockcrete walls. Kulok moved past him and pulled Sabir to the side.

'How is the seer?' he asked.

Sabir blinked. 'The same as before, no change.'

Kulok nodded to himself. There was something itching at the back of his thoughts. Something about the vox exchange on the surface that did not fit or feel right.

'Why do you ask?' asked Sabir, as Kulok moved away.

'They asked,' he replied. 'They asked twice what his condition was.'

He turned away before Sabir could reply. His feet carried him through the tunnels to the chamber where they had settled the astropath. The room had been intended as some kind of secure document storage. Metal-framed scroll racks lined the rockcrete walls, and a curation desk was bolted to one wall. The air was warm from the heat that bled through the wall from the main machine chamber. That was why they had chosen it. The astropath had been shivering since he had collapsed just after they got him to the shelter. Skin near blue, teeth chattering, it was as though he was outside in an ice wind rather than several metres below ground. They had wrapped him in blankets and put him in the warmest space they could find, but it had made no difference.

Kulok closed the door and looked down at the old man. The astropath might not be old, of course. Perhaps he was no older than Kulok; he might even have been younger. There was just no way that you could think of him as anything but old, not when you looked at him – snow-white, liver-spotted skin hung in wrinkles from a narrow, hairless skull. Yellow teeth glinted from behind cracked lips. Empty sockets gathered shadows beneath a high brow. Skeletal hands locked in crooked fists beneath his chin. He had a name, according to Sabir; he was called Halakime. Kulok stared at the figure for several minutes before he was certain that the man was still breathing. Satisfied, he turned to pull the door open.

'…an eye… of… night…'

Kulok whirled at the sound of the voice. The astropath had not moved. Kulok stood, unmoving, the sound of his rising heartbeat the only sound he could hear. Had he imagined the words? Was it the voice of his own exhaustion that had spoken? He took a step forward.

'…they see…'

This time Kulok saw the old man's lips move. He bent down. Hairs rose across his skin, and he felt something brush across his face as though he had touched a cobweb.

'…endless dark…' whispered the astropath. 'It's cold… The stars are cold…'

'Can you hear me?' he said, unsure of what else to say. 'I am here. I am with you.'

The old man grabbed Kulok so fast that he did not have time to move before a skeletal hand was locked around his wrist. Freezing pain poured up Kulok's arm. He could not move. Blackness surrounded him and he could see stars, but they were moving, swirling like insects, and beyond them something dark and sinuous coiled, clicking and purring as it glided closer and closer.

He wrenched free, gasping, and the chamber was there again. The astropath's mouth was still moving, the empty eye sockets seeming to stare up at Kulok.

'Dust…' hissed the astropath. 'Can't you hear the dust blowing on the wind? So dry. So cold under the dome of night.' The old man grimaced, and a sound that was half a cry and half a whimper came from his mouth. It was a sound of pain and despair so sharp and pure that it cut through Kulok's fear and shock.

He took old man's hand in his. The fingers felt like ice, but this time there was no pain, and the room stayed fixed before his eyes.

'I am here,' he said, his voice low and firm. 'I am with you.' The astropath's head twitched, and Kulok felt the withered fingers return his grasp. 'I am here,' he said again. 'We are not alone. Help is coming.'

Lycus rode in the assault carrier, feeling the tracks rumble over the ground, watching the dead land pass through a visual feed link to his helm. The tombstone silhouettes of buildings rose from the yellow murk and sank back out of sight to either side of the highway. They were moving down the main arterial route that crossed the northern districts of the Crescent City on an elevated spit of rockcrete and plasteel. Vehicles dotted the slim slicked surface of the highway, but they were few; there had been no time for panic when the virus bombs fell, no time for people to jam the roads as they fled. There were a few places where vehicles blocked their path, but the four tanks simply rode over them without stopping.

A lascannon-mounted Annihilator rode in the head of the squadron. Behind it came the carrier holding Lycus and a section of troops. Third in line was the flak tank, its sensor dishes rotating and its cannon and missile mount twitching like the head of a hunting dog. Last was a Vanquisher, its long barrel swept behind it as it pushed through the fog. All of them were making best speed, engines roaring at the edge of tolerance as they plunged towards the heart of the city. They were exposed, but Lycus was hoping that the enemy did not know which direction they were coming from, and so would try and reach the censorium shelter before them rather than attempt to intercept. So far, that hope had been rewarded.

Lycus blinked away the pict image from one eyepiece. Eighteen humans filled the compartment around him. Each of them wore bulky sealed armour coated in vulcanised rubber. Domed helmets enclosed their heads and locked into brass collar rings. Most of them carried short-barrelled volkite culverins, but two rested meltaguns on their knees. They were all breathing air from tanks on their backs, and their armour was designed to let them fight in the vacuum of space. On the surface of Tallarn, it might buy them a few minutes of life. Lycus wondered how long his own power armour would last against the corrosive air. Any breaches and the virus would get in. Even he could not survive that.

'Marshal,' said the voice of the lead tank commander, her voice clipped and efficient over the vox. *'We are about to exit the highway.'*

'Confirmed, machine one,' he replied and then blinked his vox over to squadron broadcast. Luminous digits counted down at the edge of his sight. 'All units, objective is ten minutes at current speed, stand by for course change–'

The missile struck the lead tank and ripped it in two. Fire and smoke punched upwards from the detonation. The wreckage tumbled on down the highway, shedding tracks.

The carrier slewed to the side.

The vox exploded with voices.

'Evasive action…'

'… jamming our auspex…'

'Where did that…?'

'Trying to get a lock…'

'I read three aerial targets, descending fast…'

Lycus blinked back to the image from outside of the carrier. Orange flame and black smoke coiled

through the fog. The wreckage of the lead tank was closing to their front. Explosions flashed in its carcass as munitions detonated in the blaze. Beyond it, he could see the ramp sliding off the highway down into the fog.

'Ram through it!' shouted Lycus. The troop carrier's driver did not hesitate. Power shuddered through the frame as the engines roared. The front of the machine hit the burning wreckage with a shriek of metal. The carrier bucked, momentum and power shoving it forwards as the bones of the burning tank raked down its side.

'Incoming!'

The shout from the flak tank reached Lycus' ears the instant before a second missile struck the wreckage behind them. A fresh explosion lifted the back of the carrier off the ground.

Lycus felt an instant of weightlessness, and then the machine struck the road. Force hammered through him. He heard muffled cries as the human soldiers slammed into the compartment walls.

'All units, full speed,' he called in the vox, 'keep moving. Machine three, target status.'

'I have three air units active,' came the voice of the flak tank commander. *'Two, possible Thunderhawk transports, dropping to surface in area of objective. Probable materiel deployment. Third is smaller, class uncertain, likely gunship. They are wrapped in sensor baffles.'*

Lycus felt himself bare his teeth. 'Burn the enemy from the sky,' he said.

'I have a partial lock. Engaging with cannons.' The fog flashed, and the rolling drum beat of the flak tank's heavy guns rose to meet the growl of the engines. *'They are evading. Transports have touched down on the surface. I have missile lock on the gunship.'* There was a pause that reminded Lycus of a marksman's inhalation before a shot. Then a streak of fire leapt into the fog shrouded sky. *'Missile loose.'*

'Time to objective, six minutes,' called Lycus. The transport lurched beneath him as it gathered speed down the ramp. Fire flashed high above them, strobing then sinking through the murk in burning yellow streaks.

'Kill shot,' said the voice from the flak tank.

'Take the transports as they lift,' said Lycus. 'All units, auspex to maximum, enemy units active on objective.'

'What was that?' asked Sabir looking up towards the ceiling of the shelter.

No one answered. Gatt's hands froze in the midst of checking the vox's encryption settings. Another rumble trembled through the walls. Dust fell. Kulok felt an electric shiver circle his stomach. It was an old but familiar feeling. He had felt it when the bombardment had started, and before then in the years he had lost to the Great Crusade.

'Start broadcasting,' he said to Gatt without moving his eyes from the ceiling. 'Make a connection, and find out how close the rescue force is.'

Gatt nodded, but Kulok was already moving to the door. His skin was buzzing, his mouth dry, the taste of metal on his tongue and teeth.

'Where are you going?' asked Sabir.

'To the airlock,' said Kulok.

'What? Why?' asked Sabir, voice snapping with tension.

Kulok did not answer or pause. He was already moving down the passage, dropping down the plasteel stairs to the level below, eyes fixed on his path. A cluster of survivors flattened themselves against the wall as he went past. Some of them shouted after him, but he did not slow down. He paused as he passed a hatch door covered in yellow hazard stripes. He shoved it open. Racks of shotguns and lasguns lined the walls, gleaming black. He pulled a shotgun down, scooped up a box of solid shells, and kept moving, shoving rounds into the breach.

An unpleasant thought was emerging in his mind. He had been so relieved to make contact with other survivors that he had not thought whether anyone else had heard their signals. Part of him had assumed that whoever had murdered Tallarn was long gone, that they had left the corpse of a world to its fate. He had not seen any sign of anyone on the surface. When the other shelter had said to use encryption keys for the vox, he had barely registered the information. Now that fact screamed to him in time with the sound of his running feet.

He reached the inner hatch of the decontamination lock. The entrance chamber was empty. None of the other survivors liked going near the exit. The bulk of the carrier he had used to go to the surface sat on the rockcrete. Decontamination fluid, rad-scouring and the toxic fog had reduced the surface of its hull to a mottled and pitted grey. The inner door loomed above him, a huge circular plate of plasteel over twice his height in diameter. Pistons gripped its edges, and pipes snaked from socks in its surface. A small porthole sat at its centre, set with glass as thick as the door itself. Kulok moved up to the glass and looked through.

He did not know what he expected to see. He was not entirely sure what he was doing, just that he suddenly felt the need to stand here, on the border between the life below and the hell above. Gloom filled the decontamination chamber on the other side of the porthole. Another porthole sat in the outer door directly opposite the one in the inner door. It was smaller, barely a hand span across. Sickly yellow light trickled through that narrow gap. Kulok watched it, his hands clammy on the grip of the shotgun. The fog folded and lapped over the view.

Something moved beyond the outer door. He squinted, breath held in his lungs. Was this them? Was this salvation? But then why had they not had vox contact yet? The shape grew in the outer porthole, casting its shadow through the murk.

The sound of running feet and gasping made him turn from the view. Sabir stumbled into the entrance chamber. Kulok took a step towards the older man, but Sabir pushed him away. The prefectus' face was red, his mouth wide as he sucked air and fought to speak.

'Signal…' Sabir gasped. 'A signal… came through…'

Kulok glanced back through the portholes. The angle was wrong, but he though he saw the light in the airlock chamber dim, as though something was blotting out the light from the outer porthole.

'It's them… the evacuation… force…'

Kulok stepped closer to the huge door. He glanced at the airlock controls set into the wall beside the door.

'They say…' Sabir coughed, his body quivering as he gulped air. 'There is…'

Kulok hesitated, the weight of the gun in his hands suddenly seeming foolish. He stepped towards the control panel.

'There is an enemy… and… and they… are…'

Kulok froze. Beyond the porthole something blotted out the light coming from the outer door.

'…coming.'

Sabir trembled and slid onto his knees. Kulok took a pace towards the inner door. He was bringing his head to look through the porthole when something hit the outer door with a sound like the shattering of mountains.

The lascannon beams reached through the building in front of Lycus' carrier and tore it apart. Plaster and rock exploded with heat. Plasteel girders folded like reeds as the building twisted under its own weight. The carrier lurched to one side. Rubble and dust cascaded down into the road. The hull of the war machine rang with impacts. Dust drowned Lycus' visual feed, and he blink-switched it to the carrier's auspex. Waves of distortion blurred the display. Flashes of weapon detonations splashed amongst the static. The hull shapes of the Iron Warriors machines stood out like blade edges reflecting moonlight at night.

Lycus' squadron was rolling down a wide street. The shelter lay half a kilometre to their right. Rows of

squat hab blocks ran along the road on both sides. The machine that had fired at them was running parallel to them, behind that screen of buildings. It was a Predator, one of a pair that the Iron Warriors transports had set down in the city before lifting off. Its twin was running with it, snapping out shots with its turret cannon and sponson guns. One road over again, the bloated bulk of an Iron Warriors Land Raider had vanished in the direction of the censorium shelter.

From a purely kill-tactic point of view, that was not a good position for the Iron Warriors. They had dropped three tanks: two light machines, and a heavy troop carrier. The Land Raider had moved directly towards the shelter, leaving its two lighter kin to face Lycus' squadron. The two Predators were fast killers in open terrain or with surprise or numbers on their side. In the graveyard of the Crescent City they had neither of those advantages. Lycus still had three war machines. Even the carrier he rode in carried twin lascannons, and enough armour to weather anything but a direct hit.

Riding close behind the carrier was the flak tank. Its cannons were not designed to engage ground targets, but they fired high explosive shells at a rate that made design and accuracy irrelevant. Then there was the Vanquisher. It was an apex killer of its kind. Given time, the Iron Warrior tanks would die. But Lycus did not have time. The Iron Warriors lay between Lycus and the shelter. They only had to buy enough time for the Land Raider and its cargo to do their work. It was a game that Lycus had already played out in his mind, and seen that he would lose. That was not something he could accept.

'Machine three,' he said across the vox. 'Static position. Fire sweep angles four-five through one-zero-three, immediate.'

'Confirm,' said the flak tank commander.

'Machine four,' snapped Lycus, 'advance on current heading, fire-free.' He held the connection long enough to hear the Vanquisher's confirmation and then switched to the carrier's internal vox. 'On my command, turn hard right, maximum speed.'

A second later, he heard the rolling roar as the flak tank opened up with its cannons. Halted in the middle of the road, its stabilisers extended, it was panning its cannons through a slow arc, punching shells through the skins of buildings into the road beyond. Lycus saw the splash of detonations as three shells hit one of the enemy Predators.

'Turn now,' he called. The human driver yanked the carrier to the right. The machine's engine screamed as power surged into the tracks. Its nose hit the wall of the building just behind the flak tank's fire. It punched through, rockcrete dust exploding around it, ramming through internal walls, stone slabs exploding under its tracks. Above it, the building began to fall floor by floor, dust and fragments spinning through the air. Lycus' armour tensed as the shock waves rang through the machine. The troopers shook like puppets with their strings cut. Then the carrier hit the other wall and ripped through onto the road. Behind it, the building cascaded to the ground. A wave of dust rolled out, clotting the fog, rattling shards onto the road surface.

Lycus blinked his visual feed link to the carrier's infra sight. The world outside the tank became a painting in red and yellow on blue. They were between the two Iron Warriors Predators. Both machines glowed bright with engine heat. The turret of the nearest machine twisted towards the carrier, lascannons flashing white.

The Vanquisher shell hit the side of the Predator's turret and ripped it out of its collar. Smoke spilled out, bubbling with white heat. The second Predator was accelerating and turning, its turret tracking around to the carrier. The Iron Warriors inside would know that they could not survive this engagement, but they also knew that their sole task was to allow the Land Raider to reach the shelter. They would see that task done.

The barrel of the Predator's cannon turned towards the carrier. A shell hit the road beside its track. The Predator rocked as its gun fired again. The shell hit the carrier's flank and ricocheted off. The sound smacked through Lycus. A sharp ringing filled his skull. The troopers in the compartment shouted in shock

and pain.

An opening between two buildings appeared before them. The carrier's engine roared as it plunged into the alley. Smoke from burning oil filled the compartment. Heavy rounds struck the block work behind them. Lycus blinked back to the auspex view – they were three hundred metres from the shelter, but the bright heat bloom of the Land Raider was already there. Above them, the tiers and domes of the censorium shadowed the fog, intact windows winking with the reflected light of explosions.

'Marshal,' came the voice of the flak tank commander. *'Multiple aerial units dropping from orbit. Estimate three lifters and four escort gunships.*'

'Engage at will,' said Lycus.

'Locking targets and preparing to fire.'

The vox stayed open long enough for Lycus to hear the first missile kicking free of the launcher. It would not be enough. They would take one of the Iron Warriors craft, two possibly, but the rest would reach the surface.

Kulok staggered backwards. The outer airlock door shook in its setting. He came to his feet. He could see something beyond the portholes, a looming slab shape moving in the gloom. The thunder roll of impact came again, and then a scream of torn metal. Kulok was at the lock controls before he was fully aware of what he was doing.

'What…' yelped Sabir. 'What are you doing?'

Kulok triggered the inner door release. Seals disengaged with a thump. Pistons began to pull the circular door upwards.

'You will kill us all!' shouted Sabir.

Kulok ducked under the opening door, and looked back at the prefectus. 'Lock the inner door,' he said.

Sabir did not move.

'Now!'

Sabir pulled himself up and scrambled for the lock controls. The inner door reversed its opening and began to press close. Kulok turned to face the outer door. The lock was small, just wide enough to take a single vehicle or a clutch of people. Nozzle and focusing arrays dotted the oiled metal of the walls. Kulok was breathing hard, trying to focus some calm into his pulse as the door sealed shut behind him.

He did not know what he was doing. He was one man, unarmoured and barely armed. The moment the outer door was breached, he would have seconds to live before Tallarn's air took him. He might have a moment to pull the trigger on his gun once, maybe twice. He would take those two seconds, and those shots. It was his mistake; he had insisted on going to the surface, on throwing a signal out onto the wind for someone, anyone to hear. Perhaps they would have all died in the shelter in a few weeks. Perhaps – as clear as it had seemed then, it was less so now. All that was certain was that everyone in the shelter – all the little clutches of shivering scribes and administrators – all of them would now die, and die because of him. One shot could not prevent that. No act so small could stop whatever death pounded on the door, but that did not matter. The deed alone mattered.

Metal thunder shook the air inside the lock as another blow struck the metal. The sound blurred into the shriek of tearing metal. Kulok was breathing hard, heart hammering. He stepped closer to the tiny porthole.

And looked.

Figures stood in the yellow gloom at the bottom of the entrance ramp. Figures that could have been men, but men were not sculpted from iron. They were huge; taller than anything should be that had such a shape. Their shoulders were hunched curves of dull metal. Curtains of chain hung from them, swaying as they drew back lightning wreathed fists to strike the door. Red light shone from the slots that were their eyes. Kulok knew what he was looking at, but the shock still caught the breath in his lungs. They were Space

Marines. They were Terminators.

A Land Raider sat on the ramp above them, its weapon pods twitching. As Kulok watched, one of the Terminators turned, head rotating in its socket. The red slot of its eyes met Kulok's gaze. Its left fist ended in a pair of chain blades. The teeth blurred as they spun. Kulok froze, the gun in his hand hanging heavy. The Terminator raised its fist.

A flash of light split the gloom at the top of the ramp. The Land Raider rocked in place. Lightning whipped from the muzzles of its lascannons. Kulok blinked. Then there was a flash, and molten orange billowed into the fog as the Land Raider exploded. Flames rushed down the ramp. Pieces of armour struck the door as the blast wave hit. The Terminators were moving, gun arms rising as fire swallowed them.

'Machine kill!' called the Vanquisher commander over the vox. Lycus nodded. The kill had been good, exceptionally good in fact. The carrier's lascannons and the Vanquisher shell had struck the Land Raider in quick succession. The first had weakened the Land Raider's frontal armour. The second had torn the tank apart.

'Take us in,' said Lycus. 'Do we still have a vox link to the shelter?'

'Signal has failed, marshal,' called the carrier commander. 'But we won't reach the entrance anyway, sir. The wreckage is blocking the top of the ramp.'

Lycus blinked the auspex feed from his sight. The masked faces of the human soldiers looked back at him. They had heard the carrier commander's words, and all of them would knew what it meant.

'All troops, prepare to deploy,' said Lycus. 'We clear the area in front of the entrance. When that is clear, we proceed through the shelter entrance and decontaminate.'

There were no salutes, no gestures of dissent or protest. The soldiers simply did what their training had soaked into their flesh and blood. Weapon catches released. Hands checked grenades hanging from harnesses, tapped breathing tubes. Lycus watched them, struck for a moment by their discipline. They all knew what they were stepping into, what world of murder waited outside the carrier's hull. They knew, but still they did not hesitate or question.

'We need to reach the astropath. And we need time.' He pulled the plasma pistol from his thigh. It began to buzz, charge building in its coils. He thought of the days and steps that had brought him to this: the days of war and conquest, the victories won, and the dead looking back at him from the path of memory. He thought of Phall, of the blood of his brothers scattering into the void, and the silent roar of flame as warships drowned in the fires of death. The carrier lurched as it turned hard, engine gunning. The human soldiers shook.

He felt his mouth open, words forming on his lips, and then growling from his speaker grille.

'You are warriors of the Emperor,' he said. 'War is choice, the choice to stand, the choice to fight, the choice to keep your oaths. You have chosen to be here, to stand here, to hold to the oaths we made to the future of mankind, and I would choose no others to stand with.'

The vox roared with the soldiers' reply. The carrier slammed to a halt. Assault ramps hinged open. Fog-thickened air poured in. Lycus' armour began to scream warnings: toxic, corrosive, viral. The soldiers charged through the fog. It began to eat at the soldiers, layers of vulcanised rubber peeling from their armour. The first one fell after two paces and hit the ground like a bag of fluid. The rest ran on. The wreck of the Land Raider was pouring fire and smoke towards the hidden sky. Bolt rounds roared out of the fog. Three soldiers fell at the same moment.

Targeting and threat markers spun in Lycus' helmet display as he ran. The heat of the burning wreck sent ripples of static through his sight. Another human went down, jerking as he hit the ground, holes eaten in his air feeds. The fog shrouded the corpse as Lycus passed. He was at the front of the remaining soldiers, the slope of the ramp beneath his feet. A bolt round exploded against his shoulder. He stumbled, caught

himself, brought his plasma pistol up and fired down the ramp. The shot was almost blind, but that did not matter; what did matter was pouring everything they could into the space that the bolt rounds were coming from.

'Grenades,' he shouted, the sound booming flat in the fog. Two frag grenades were in his hand. He heard another of the soldiers gasp and fall, flesh turning to sludge in failed armour. He threw the grenades and pulled his power sword from its scabbard. Explosions blossomed as he charged down the ramp.

Kulok watched the world become fire. In the seconds after the explosion the world beyond the porthole had become distant, as though he was watching a recording on a vid- screen. It was oddly quiet, the roar of explosives and gunfire locked behind the layers of plasteel. Every now and again the door shook, and the rumble of the explosions outside became metallic thunder, rolling through the still air within. Figures moved through the flame, blurred by speed and smoke. He saw the Terminators bracing, the flames washing them with soot. There were humans out there too, soldiers in bloated void armour firing beams through the smoke and flame. It was impossible, but there they were: standing on the surface of Tallarn, fighting, advancing as the air dissolved their armour.

A melta beam flicked out, struck a Terminator, and punched through armour and flesh. The Terminator reeled, struck the door, and the impact rang in Kulok's ears. Another figure came down the ramp. It was another Space Marine, but in yellow armour. The sword in his hand spat sparks into the fog. The Terminators braced and fired as one. Bolters hammered into the charging warrior. Splinters of yellow lacquer and ceramite scattered from the lone Space Marine. He did not stop. Another melta blast stuck one of the Terminators. Energy beams struck its squad mates like rain. The yellow warrior was within blade range. A Terminator with a chainfist met the charge.

Sword and spinning teeth kissed. Sparks and lightning lit the smoke-shadowed air. Vast strengths strained against each other as the weapons locked. The Terminator shrugged, the movement rippling with strength. The sword sheered free of its chain fist. The yellow warrior backhanded his sword into the side of the Terminator's leg. It was not a deep cut, barely enough to splinter the shin plate, but it was enough to crack the thinner armour at the back of the knee. The Terminator brought his fist up, froze and began to fall as the air of Tallarn found the flesh within the skin of iron.

The warrior in yellow was firing before the Terminator struck the floor. Blasts of plasma spat from his pistol. Sheets of volkite energy were coming down the ramp from a line of advancing human soldiers. A Terminator ran at them. It was fast, shockingly fast for something so big. Beams shattered on its armour like drops of rain on hot steel. It struck one of the soldiers and the human burst apart. The rest fired at it. They were so close that the muzzles of their guns were almost touching their target. The Terminator was burning, but did not fall. It swung its fist wide. Bodies fell, broken, blood congealing to black as it met the air.

The warrior in yellow aimed and fired. The burst of plasma bolts struck the Terminator in the back. Metal blistered and flashed to gas, and the Terminator was falling, fist swinging like a toy automaton.

The yellow-armoured warrior turned, aim sweeping to the last Terminator before the door, but that last enemy was too fast. Bolt rounds hammered into the warrior's legs, and now he was falling, and the Terminator was coming forwards, and the rain of volkite and melta fire was slackening.

Kulok heard himself shout. The sound rang through the lock. It was a cry of terror and pleading for the universe to stop, for the scene playing out before his eyes to prove false.

He watched the Terminator raise its fist above the fallen warrior in yellow. On the ramp above it, the figure of a lone human soldier swayed, gun firing even as it fell from its hand. The beam struck the Terminator. It hesitated for a second, as though stung, and then punched down. The blow never landed. The yellow-armoured warrior rolled aside and stabbed upwards. The power sword punched through the Terminator's eye slot and into the face beneath. The helm exploded with a whip crack of white light.

The warrior stood, slowly, armour grey and smoking. Behind him, fire rolled in the fog. He turned to look at the door. Kulok met the blank green gaze of the helm.

Radiation and liquid poured over Lycus. The rad-scrubbers and fluid vents spun around him again, drenching him, stripping virus and matter from his armour. None of the human soldiers had made it to the door. He alone stood and waited for the decontamination to finish and the inner door to open. The rings set into the walls spun one last time, then froze. Fluid dripped from the nozzles and steam rose from his armour. It was heavily damaged. He estimated that he had had another twenty seconds before a joint seal would have corroded and failed. Warnings pulsed at the side of his sight, and the servos in his legs clattered and whined as he stepped up to the inner door.

A broad-faced man was watching him from the other side of a glass porthole. The man had thin, feather-line scars down his cheek and the look of strength softened at the edges. His eyes were steady though: a fighter's eyes.

The inner door hissed open. Lycus stepped across, pulling his helm free and breathing in the smell of the shelter: rockcrete, hot wiring and poorly filtered air.

The man with the eyes of a soldier looked at him. He had a shotgun in his hand, a finger on the trigger guard, but the barrel carefully point at the floor. Another man in the clothes of a prefectus in the local administration stood against the wall, eyes wide, face pale.

'I am Lycus,' he said.

'You have come for us?' asked the man with the shotgun, not moving. 'You heard us? You have come for us?'

'Where is the astropath?' asked Lycus.

'How are we getting out? Are there more of you coming?'

Lycus took a half step forward.

'What is your name?' he asked the man with the shotgun.

'I am Kulok.'

Lycus nodded. 'Where is the astropath, Kulok? There is not much time. I need to go to him now.'

Kulok did not reply, and Lycus thought he saw something flicker in the human's gaze.

Then the man nodded and turned. 'Follow me, lord,' he said.

They hurried through the tunnels of the shelter. Lycus saw faces in side tunnels, eyes staring at him as he followed Kulok. The shelter was not large, but it was almost deserted. He could smell the build-up of pollutants and carbon dioxide in the air. A few more days and everybody in the shelter would suffocate. His vox hissed snatches of information at him from the commander of the Vanquisher on the surface. The carrier was gone. Its internal seals had failed after Lycus had disembarked. A saturation rocket strike had taken out the flak tank two minutes ago. Only the Vanquisher remained. The enemy drop ships were on the ground. Multiple armoured units were converging on the shelter.

'Here,' said Kulok as they reached a heavy door. The room beyond was small. Racks of parchment hid the walls. The last astropath on Tallarn lay in a tangle of blankets, blind sockets fixed on the ceiling above, mouth forming silent words.

Lycus became still, his hurried movements fading to stillness.

'He has been like this for the last few hours,' said Kulok. 'Before that, he was comatose.' The human paused. 'I have no idea what he is saying when he speaks.'

Lycus nodded without breaking his gaze on the astropath. He knelt down beside the withered figure. Static and snatches of words cracked from the vox set in his collar. He ignored them.

'What is his name?' he asked.

'Halakime, apparently, but…'

Lycus raised his hand and Kulok went quiet.

'Astropath Halakime,' said Lycus.

The astropath's lips kept moving, but there was no sign that he had heard his name.

'Astropath, I am Marshal Lycus of the Seventh Legion Astartes. Can you hear me?'

The astropath did not move.

Lycus opened his mouth to speak again.

'Wait,' said Kulok, and moved around Lycus. Slowly, as though he was reaching to pick up a sleeping snake, Kulok reached out and took one of the astropath's withered hands. 'We are here,' said Kulok. 'They have come for us, for you. Can you hear us?'

Lycus watched the astropath's face. The veins running across the scalp were blue threads in translucent white. Kulok looked at Lycus.

The astropath's hand spasmed shut around Kulok's. His body snapped ridged. Lycus heard joints pop.

'Dust, dry, dust, dry, no water, only dust and darkness!' the astropath shouted, his voice high and shrill. 'Darkness below, darkness at the root of the world, and the eye beyond, the eye within sees and seeks and knows–'

'Halakime!' Lycus roared the name, and it thundered around the small room.

Kulok jerked back as though he had been struck. The astropath twitched, shivered and the words babbling from his lips drained away.

'My name…' said the astropath. 'Where am… What is…'

'Astropath Halakime,' said Lycus again, his voice low. 'I am Marshal Lycus of the Seventh Legion Astartes. I need you to listen to me.'

The astropath shivered and went still. The pits of his eyes fixed on Lycus, and the Space Marine had the sensation that the man was looking through him.

'I hear you, son of stone,' said Halakime, and his voice was steady.

'Do you know where you are?'

'Tallarn, or at least that was where I was.'

'You are still on Tallarn,' said Lycus. 'The world is dead, and you are the last of your kind here.'

'Dust…' said the old man. 'I saw the dust blowing in the wind.'

'Those loyal to the Imperium need to know what has happened here. They need to know that the Iron Warriors are here.' Behind him, Lycus heard Kulok's breath leave his lungs.

Halakime shivered.

'I…' he began. 'The wind, the night… It will take…'

'Whatever it takes, word must reach them.' Lycus watched as the astropath bowed his head.

'I…' began the astropath. 'To project a message form requires preparation. I do not have a meaning source.'

Lycus released the armour seal on his right wrist, and pulled his gauntlet free. The astropath's hand was cold as Lycus gripped it. An electric tingle passed up his nerves.

'Take what you need to understand,' said Lycus.

Halakime shivered. The lips pulled back from his teeth. Fire burned through Lycus. Smoke and mist breathed from the astropath's mouth. Pain yanked Lycus' thoughts. Frost grew on their clasped hands. Their thoughts blurred, mixed, flowed like burning oil and freezing water.

He was a boy watching the thoughts of those around him dance in haloes…

He was a warrior standing on the walls of Catulon, the shells of his autocannon pouring into the beasts below…

He was a robed neophyte kneeling as his eyes boiled away under the gaze of a being that was less than a god, more than a man…

He was standing on the deck of the *Light of Inwit* as the Iron Warriors boarding pods bit through the hull…

He was…

…holding Halakime's hand, his flesh crawling with heat.

'I have enough,' said the astropath. 'I will send the message.'

Lycus nodded, and stood. A low rumble growled through the air, and the ceiling shook.

'I will give you what time I can,' said Lycus, and turned to leave the room.

'This was it, wasn't it?' said Kulok from behind him. Lycus did not stop moving. His hand pulled his plasma pistol free, and he checked the charge coils. 'There is not going to be an evacuation, is there? You came here because of the astropath, and only because of him. We are not going to survive.'

Lycus paused and looked back at the man.

'Word must get out. Tallarn's fate must be heard,' he said. 'You have served the Emperor well. You will be remembered.'

Kulok held Lycus' gaze, and then shook his head.

'No,' he said, and walked past Lycus. 'No, I won't. But I will stand with you.'

Kulok pulled the envirosuit on. It was clammy against his skin. The breath feed snapped into place, and cool air flowed across his face. He checked the harnesses holding the oxygen bottle across his back and picked the shotgun up. Twelve solid rounds: he doubted he would be able to reload wearing the suit's heavy gloves. He snorted to himself. Once Tallarn's killing air was inside the shelter he doubted he would have time to reach the end of the shotgun's clip.

'What is happening?' said Sabir. Kulok had not heard the prefectus enter the armoury. 'What are you doing?' Kulok turned, and shouldered past Sabir. 'What is–'

Kulok looked at him, and the man stepped back, blinking. There were tears on the prefectus' cheeks. He held the older man's glistening stare, and then turned and began to run.

He reached the airlock to find Lycus standing before it. His sword was drawn, his pistol in his hand.

There was a boom, and light flashed through the porthole. Dust fell like fine snow from the roof.

'Shaped krak charges,' said Lycus, his voice growling flat from his helm grille. 'They are cutting and blasting sequentially, creating fault lines in the door. They will be through the first door soon.'

As though in answer to those words, the inner airlock door rang like a gong. Kulok swallowed, his throat dry. He saw a shape moving on the other side of the inner porthole. A slab, armoured face looking in. A blinding beam of light flared across the porthole. Molten crystal began to weep down the circle of crystal as the beam bored deeper. The door shook.

'Will this…' began Kulok, and found his voice catching in his lips. 'Will this make a difference?'

Lycus looked at him, green lenses bright in the bare ceramite of his helm.

'Yes,' he said after a moment. 'Every act of defiance matters.'

'To the Imperium?'

'To existence.'

Kulok looked back at the door. The porthole was a circle of molten orange. Three other points to either side of the centre were glowing cherry red as the cutters bit deeper. Another metal roar shook the quiet.

'What were you?' asked Lycus.

Kulok looked up at Lycus with surprise. The Space Marine tilted his head to the side. 'Before this, what were you?'

Kulok shrugged. 'An evader of taxes.'

A low growl came from Lycus, getting louder as the warrior's armour shook. After a second, Kulok realised that the Space Marine was laughing.

Lycus brought his plasma pistol up to aim at where the airlock door was staring to blister yellow. Kulok raised his shotgun, braced, finger tense on the trigger.

The airlock door blew in. White hot shards of metal and crystal flew inwards in a wash of smoke and tainted air.

Kulok fired five rounds before Tallarn pulled his flesh from his bones and sent his memory out into the realm of the dead.

They heard.

Across the star-dotted vaults of space, astropaths woke from their trances with images of iron giants striding through dead cities and silence. Shivering, they unravelled the sensations of their dreams, and the allegorical meanings shouted in their minds with the fury of a last, dying scream.

'Come to us,' *it said.* 'The Iron Warriors are here. Tallarn is dead. Its grave will be the anvil upon which you break them.'

They heard.

On the bridge of the Lament of Caliban, *they heard.*

In the Conclave of Iron, the Princeps of the Legio Gryphonicus and the Myrmidon Lords of Zelth heard.

Amidst the silence of the Nerren gulf, the ships of Niobe the Castigator heard.

Alone in the tower of his war-barque, Tempis Lor – General of Seventy Thousand Swords – heard.

And in a hundred more quiet places, a thousand more, the loyal warriors of Emperor heard. And one by one, they rose to answer the siren call of war.

About the Author

John French has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, the novel *Tallarn: Ironclad*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile, Ahriman: Sorcerer* and *Ahriman: Unchanged*, plus a number of related short stories collected in *Ahriman: Exodus*, including 'The Dead Oracle' and 'Hand of Dust'. Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella *Fateweaver*, plus many short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

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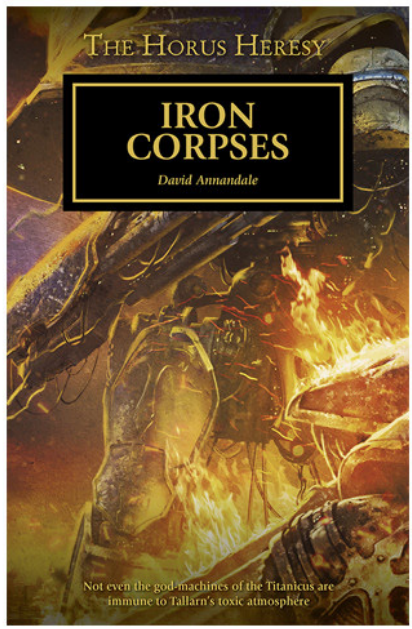
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